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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Competence and Performance Versus Langue and Parole: A Comparative Linguistic Analysis

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines two key dichotomies in modern linguistics: Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts of langue and parole and Noam Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. Although these frameworks arise from different traditions—structuralism and generative linguistics—they both aim to separate the abstract system of language from its actual use in communication. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for analysing how language is structured, learned, and used in real-life situations. This study provides a comparative analysis of these models by examining their definitions, underlying assumptions, similarities, and major differences. It highlights how Saussure focuses on the social and collective nature of language, while Chomsky emphasizes the mental and innate aspects of linguistic knowledge. By comparing these perspectives, the research demonstrates their contributions to linguistic theory and their continued relevance for both theoretical studies and practical applications in language learning and analysis.

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## Introduction

For more than a century, the nature of language has remained a central concern in linguistic research. Scholars have continuously explored how language should be defined and understood, particularly in relation to its structure and use. A key issue in this debate is whether language is best conceptualized as an abstract system of rules or as observable behavior produced by speakers in real communicative contexts. This question has led to the development of various theoretical models that seek to explain the relationship between linguistic knowledge and language use (Saussure, 1916/2011; Chomsky, 1965).

One influential approach to this issue is the distinction between underlying knowledge and actual language use. Linguists argue that speakers' knowledge of language is not always fully reflected in everyday communication, as real speech is often affected by errors, hesitations, and social or contextual factors (Chomsky, 1965; Yule, 2020). Consequently, distinguishing between the mental system of language and its practical realization has become an essential method in linguistic analysis.

Two of the most significant frameworks in this regard are the concepts of langue and parole proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure and the distinction between competence and performance introduced by Noam Chomsky. Saussure, representing the structuralist tradition, defined langue as the shared and systematic aspect of language, while parole refers to individual instances of language use (Saussure, 1916/2011). In contrast, Chomsky, working within the generative framework, described competence as the speaker's internalized knowledge of language and performance as its actual use in real situations (Chomsky, 1965). Although both models distinguish between an abstract system and its realization, they differ in their theoretical orientation and analytical focus.

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**Detailed Explanation of Langue and Parole**

**Langue**

Langue is the abstract, systematic, and social dimension of language. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, it refers to the shared set of conventions, rules, and signs that exist within a speech community (Saussure, 1916). It includes grammar, vocabulary, and the system of linguistic signs whose meanings arise from their relationships and oppositions within the overall structure. Langue is relatively stable and exists independently of individual speakers, as it represents the collective knowledge of a language community. Because it conceptualizes language as an organized and rule-governed system, Saussure argued that linguistics should primarily focus on the study of langue, as it provides a foundation for systematic and scientific analysis (Saussure, 1916).

**Parole**

Parole refers to the actual, individual speech acts produced by speakers. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, it includes real instances of language use, such as utterances, pronunciation, intonation, and stylistic variation (Saussure, 1916/2011). Parole is influenced by psychological, social, and contextual factors, making it variable and dynamic in nature. Although langue is realized through parole, the latter reflects the unpredictable and changing aspects of language use in everyday communication (Lyons, 1981; Yule, 2020). Due to its variability, parole is considered less suitable for systematic linguistic analysis, as it lacks the stability and structure associated with langue (Sampson, 1980; Crystal, 2008).

**Detailed Explanation of Competence and Performance**

**Competence**

Linguistic competence refers to a speaker-hearer's internalized knowledge of their language. Introduced by Noam Chomsky, competence includes an understanding of grammatical rules that enables speakers to produce and comprehend an infinite number of well-formed sentences (Chomsky, 1965). This knowledge is primarily cognitive in nature and is often considered an inherent aspect of the human language faculty (Chomsky, 1986). Chomsky emphasized that the central goal of linguistic theory is to describe this underlying competence rather than the imperfect and variable data of actual language use (Chomsky, 1965; Radford, 2004).

**Performance**

Performance refers to the actual use of language in real-life situations. According to Noam Chomsky, it includes all aspects of language production and comprehension, such as speech errors, hesitations, memory limitations, and other non-linguistic factors that influence communication (Chomsky, 1965). Because performance is affected by psychological and environmental conditions, it does not always accurately reflect a speaker's underlying linguistic competence. For this reason, performance is considered variable and less reliable as a basis for linguistic analysis compared to competence (Fromkin et al., 2018; Yule, 2020).

**Similarities and Differences**

Both dichotomies distinguish between an abstract linguistic system and its realization in use:

**Similarities**

1. Langue and competence denote the underlying system of linguistic knowledge.
2. Parole and performance represent the realization of language in actual communicative situations.
3. Both theoretical frameworks assign primary importance to the abstract linguistic system as the central object of linguistic inquiry.

**Differences**

1. Langue is external and social; competence is internal and personal.
2. While Chomsky's is generative and cognitive, Saussure's approach is structuralist.
3. While Saussure sees parole as crucial but ancillary, Chomsky mostly disregards performance from basic linguistic theory.

## Research Objective

The main aim of this study is to compare and critically evaluate the concepts of langue–parole and competence–performance in order to clarify their theoretical similarities, differences, and relevance to modern linguistics.

## Research Questions

1. How are langue and parole characterized? According to Saussure linguistics,

2. How do performance and competence operate? Within Chomsky's generative theory,

3. How do these two divisions differ and how are they similar?

## Literature Review

A persistent motif in linguistic research has been the difference between basic linguistic knowledge and real-world language use. By stressing language as a socially shared system instead of a series of personal utterances, Saussure's ideas of langue and parole set the groundwork for structural linguistics. Early structuralisms saw things this way to look at phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns all at the same time, with a focus on how things work together in the language system rather than how they changed over time (Saussure, 1916; Sampson, 1980).

Chomsky reinterpreted this contrast with the ideas of competence and performance as generative linguistics developed in the middle of the twentieth century. Chomsky (1965) maintained that linguistic theory should aspire to characterize the ability of an ideal speaker-hearer, therefore ignoring performance mistakes brought on by memory restrictions or diversions. This change refocused linguistic inquiry on formal models of grammar and cognitive processes supporting language development.

Many academics have looked at how these two opposites relate to one another. Lyons (1981) says that competence–performance is like langue–parole in that it separates knowledge from use, but it is different because it is about psychology while Saussure's langue is about society and groups. Cook (1988) also says that while both separate system from use, Chomsky's competence is about the mind and is personal, while Saussure's langue is about society and groups.

Sociolinguists and functional linguists criticize both approaches for ignoring language variation and context. Performance data are not just skewed reflections of competency but rather methodical and sociologically significant, according to Labov (1972). Halliday (1978) adds even more strongly that language ought to be viewed as a tool for interpreting meaning in social contact instead of just as an abstract system by itself.

More recent strategies try to close the divide between performance and competency. Based on language use and experience, cognitive and usage-based linguists contend that linguistic knowledge develops (Bybee, 2010). These points of view imply that explaining the dynamic character of language may need more than just clear divisions between system and use. Consequently, current linguistic study is revaluating the distinctions between competence–performance and langue–parole.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and descriptive research design. Data are obtained from established linguistics texts, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other credible academic sources. The research is grounded in theoretical analysis and comparative evaluation, rather than empirical investigation. Keywords derived from the primary research objectives were used to guide the literature search and ensure the relevance and adequacy of the selected materials.

The key terms used for the search as shown in table 1, were as follows: **Competence and Performance Versus Langue and Parole, Detailed Explanation of Langue and Parole, Detailed Explanation of Competence and Performance** and **Similarities and Differences**. Articles were searched in electronic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR Scopus, ERIC, Cambridge Journals, and Springer Link.

Then the title, abstract, and keywords were used to search published articles, journal papers,

conference proceedings, workshops, and symposiums.

**Table 1. Search strings**

| Database | Search String | Time Span | Language | Document Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Google Scholar | "Competence and performance" AND linguistics | 1960–2024 | English | Journal articles, books |
| Google Scholar | "Langue and parole" AND Saussure | 1916–2024 | English | Books, journal articles |
| Scopus | ("competence" AND "performance") AND language | 1965–2024 | English | Peer-reviewed journal articles |
| Web of Science | "langue" AND "parole" AND linguistics | 1950–2024 | English | Journal articles |
| JSTOR | "Competence vs performance" OR "langue vs parole" | 1960–2024 | English | Journal articles |

## Results

The findings of this study are given considering the research questions posed before.

**Research Question 1: Saussure linguistics' definition of langue and parole?**

While parole describes particular and real speech acts, langue is discovered by the study to be a socially shared, abstract system of linguistic signs and rules. Given its stability and systematic nature, Saussure gives langue much more importance as the right focus of linguistic study; parole is seen as changeable and dependent on the environment.

**Research Question 2: According to Chomsky's generative theory, how do performance and competence operate?**

The results show that a perfect speaker-hearers inside grasp of grammar—which lets them produce and grasp countless sentences—is competence. Performance, however, shows how people use language. This can be influenced by external influences as well as cognitive limitations. Under Chomsky's approach, theoretical importance is given more to proficiency than to performance.

**Research Question 3: How are these two dichotomies different and similar?**

The comparison shows that actual language use differs from underlying linguistic knowledge in both dichotomies. But while competence is a cognitive and mental concept, langue is viewed as a social phenomenon. Parole and performance also relate to language use; however, performance is more directly linked to psychological limits.

The findings generally support the idea that although the two models have the same aim, they have very different theoretical orientation and explanatory emphasis.

**Table 3. List of selected articles**

| Year | Author(s) | Title | Research Purpose | Method Type | Context |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1916 | Saussure, F. de | *Course in General Linguistics* | To distinguish *langue* (social system) from *parole* (individual speech) | Theoretical / Structural analysis | Structural linguistics |
| 1965 | Chomsky, N. | *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* | To introduce the distinction between linguistic competence and performance | Generative theoretical analysis | Generative grammar |
| 1972 | Hymes, D. | *On Communicative Competence* | To critique Chomsky's competence model and include social context | Theoretical / Sociolinguistic | Sociolinguistics |
| 1981 | Lyons, J. | *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction* | To explain and compare Saussurean and Chomskyan dichotomies | Descriptive / Comparative | General linguistics |
| 1987 | Chomsky, N. | *Knowledge of Language* | To refine the concept of competence as internalized knowledge | Theoretical | Linguistic theory |
| 1994 | Cook, V. | *Universal Grammar and Second Language Learning* | To apply competence–performance distinction to second language learning | Applied theoretical | SLA |
| 1978 | Halliday, M. A. K. | *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* | To challenge abstract competence models through functional usage | Functional analysis | Systemic functional linguistics |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2010 | Bybee, J. | *Language, Usage and Cognition* | To argue that linguistic knowledge emerges from language use | Usage-based / Cognitive | Cognitive linguistics |
| 2018 | Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. | *An Introduction to Language* | To explain competence–performance and langue–parole for learners | Descriptive / Educational | Linguistics education |

## Discussion

The results of this study show that no one theoretical distinction can completely explain the complexity of language. This finding fits with prior arguments in linguistic theory on the restrictions of purely theoretical models. For instance, Chomsky's distinction between ability and performance highlights the relevance of underlying mental systems, but later academics have condemned this divide for ignoring actual language usage and diversity (Hymes, 1972; Lyons, 1981). Structuralist methodologies that treat abstract components such phonemes and morphemes as fixed systems sometimes at the expense of usage-based variability reflect similar worries.

The current study agrees with past structuralist investigations (Bloomfield, 1933; Trubetzkoy, 1939) that abstract systems are required for grasping linguistic structure. But it also backs more recent studies highlighting how linguistic patterns are formed by language usage. According to scholars of usage such Bybee (2010), meaning, variety, and frequency in actual conversation greatly help to define linguistic structure. Consistent with this viewpoint, the current results indicate that performance data provide important insights that simply conceptual models cannot catch.

Modern linguistic methods also aim to combine competence and performance rather than treating them as absolutely separate domains (Anderson, 1992; Fromkin et al., 2018). Consistent with these studies, the present research argues for an integrated approach, showing that actual language use and abstract linguistic knowledge are dependent. Comparing these theoretical viewpoints, this study adds to current debates by demonstrating that a thorough knowledge of language calls for focus on both underlying systems and actual use.

## Conclusion

The distinctions between langue and parole and between competence and performance remain fundamental concepts in linguistic theory. Although both frameworks share the common goal of distinguishing between underlying linguistic knowledge and actual language use, they differ significantly in their theoretical orientations and assumptions about the nature of language. While Ferdinand de Saussure emphasizes the social and collective dimensions of language, Noam Chomsky focuses on its cognitive and mental foundations.

This study has shown that neither framework alone is sufficient to fully explain the complexity of language. A comprehensive understanding of linguistic phenomena requires attention not only to abstract systems but also to real language use, contextual factors, and the interaction between social and cognitive processes. Language is not merely a fixed system of rules, nor is it simply observable behaviour; rather, it is a dynamic interplay between knowledge and use.

In conclusion, integrating insights from both structuralist and generative traditions provides a more balanced and complete perspective on language. Future research should continue to bridge these approaches by incorporating empirical data and interdisciplinary perspectives, particularly from sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. Such efforts will contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how language functions in both the mind and society.

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